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SUBJECT: WELCOME TO THE WORLD'S NEWEST DEMOCRACY: BHUTAN
SHIFTS TO CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY

REF: A. NEW DELHI 849

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 836

[1](#)C. NEW DELHI 202

[1](#)D. KOLKATA 376

[1](#)1. (SBU) Demonstrating a strong commitment to a transition to democracy, Bhutan went to the polls on March 24 to provide a lop-sided victory for the Druk Pheuensum Tshogpa (DPT), one of the two parties in contention. DPT president Jigme Y. Thinley is expected to be sworn in as Prime Minister shortly after the King convenes parliament on April 5. Among its first acts, the new parliament will have to ratify the draft constitution and to pass the country's 10th five-year plan. The DPT landslide was unexpected and seems to be related to the Bhutanese people's discomfort with the family connections, business practices, personality and campaign style of the president of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Civil servants, who have disproportionately supported the DPT, may have played an important role in influencing the electorate during the waning days. The European Union observer team identified a few shortcoming but these are mere quibbles in a process where all international observers, including the EU, found the elections free, fair and transparent. Turn out was heavy at 79.4 percent. The mood of the electorate at polling time was festive yet solemn.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Bhutan's execution of such an orderly transition to democracy offers a shining example to its neighbors on the wisdom of choosing pluralism, tolerance and democratic values over autocracy, intolerance and exclusion. The USG should identify ways to support the democratic transition in Bhutan through programs designed to build capacity of democracy institutions. The new National Assembly will include nine ethnic Nepalese and four women. The ethnic Nepali presence in the National Assembly, proportionately larger than its share of the population, is particularly heartening as it may help heal some of the old wounds that underlie the refugee camps in Nepal and the feeling of alienation among some ethnic Nepali Bhutanese. It would have been preferable to have a stronger opposition in the National Assembly to keep the new government on its toes. It should be noted, however, that

the National Council and the king will be able to provide checks and balances on the new government, if necessary. End Summary.

Embrace of Democratic Ideals

¶3. (U) In a show of strong commitment to democratic values, Bhutan's voters went to the polls on March 24 in record numbers (79.4 percent turnout) to elect 47 members to the National Assembly. The election marks the end of a crucial phase in the transition of Bhutan from an absolute monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy. Earlier, on December 31, 2007, 53 percent of registered Bhutanese voters had elected a National Council. Together, the National Assembly, the National Council and the King will constitute the new nation's Parliament, according to the country's draft constitution.

Weighty Agenda Awaits Parliament

¶4. (U) The King is expected to convene Parliament on April 5 and invite the winning Druk Phesum Tshogpa (DPT) party to form the government. Former Prime Minister and current DPT President Jigme Y. Thinley is slated to become Prime Minister. An important agenda awaits the new government at the onset. Its first order of business will be to ratify the new Constitution, which has been carefully drafted by an expert panel of jurists who studied constitutions of at least 60 other countries to write a charter that incorporates some of the most progressive principles of a modern nation-state,

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including separation of church and state, protection of individual rights and other provisions to ensure a pluralistic and tolerant democratic society. Its second order of business will be to vote on Bhutan's 10th five-year plan, which will embody the political, social and economic priorities of the new government and establish the economic roadmap for the country for the next five years. It will then embark on the business of governing, with all powers voluntarily divested to it by the King.

Congrats: The World's Oldest Democracy to its Youngest

¶5. (U) Embassy New Delhi Pol MinCouns and Poloff visited Bhutan on March 22-26 to witness the Bhutanese elections. Although credentialed as "official international observers," the purpose of the USG officials visit was to demonstrate support for the small, isolated country's bold transition to into the rough and tumble of a democratic constitutional monarchy. While in Bhutan, the USG team spoke with many news organizations, lauding Bhutan and the Bhutanese for their courage and fortitude in holding elections and their commitment to democracy. The Department Spokesman's March 24 statement congratulating Bhutan on its elections received wide media coverage both within the country and on international news channels.

Domestic and International Media in Full Force

¶6. (U) The USG team joined a host of other international observers, including those from the European Commission, Canada, Australia, Japan and several other western countries. Reflecting the close interest and support of the GOI in the democratic process unfolding in its neighbor, the GOI sent a high level delegation led by its Chief Election Commissioner and including Special Envoy Shyam Saran and former Foreign Secretary Salman Haider. The domestic and international

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media presence at the elections was extensive with the Bhutan press, BBC, Reuters, AFP and other international and regional

news services providing wide coverage. There were numerous Indian news services in Bhutan to cover the elections.

DPT in a Landslide

17. (SBU) In a startling surprise, the DPT won the election in a landslide, bagging 45 on the 47 contents. Government officials, international observers as well as the Bhutanese people were stunned by the lopsided results. Many People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidates considered invincible, including former Prime Minister and party president Sangay Ngedup, fell to crushing defeats. In the days preceding the polls, the consensus opinion of most observers was that the election was too close to call and, even if one side or the other did unexpectedly well, less than 10 seats would separate the winner from the loser. (Comment: In the days following the election, the PDP has protested the election results, alleging that some candidates from the victorious DPT had broken election rules by campaigning within 48 hours of the opening of polls. The USG observer team has no way of ascertaining the veracity of the claim. We expect the extremely independent and impartial Election Commission of Bhutan will examine the charge. We would not be surprised, however, if the PDP charge is merely a gambit by the PDP to save face after its crushing defeat. End Comment.)

Interpreting the Results

18. (SBU) From extensive consultation with a wide cross-section of Bhutanese government officials, journalists, international observers, diplomats and international aid

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officials, the USG team gleaned several reasons behind the Bhutanese electorate's unequivocal rejection of the PDP. First and foremost, is the deep discomfort that the Bhutanese people felt over the business practices of the Fourth King's in-laws. PDP President Sangay Ngedup is the brother of the Fourth King's wives. Ngedup's father - the Fourth King's father-in-law and the Fifth King's maternal grandfather -- has earned a reputation as someone who used his proximity to the king to amass a fortune through sometimes questionable tactics. The Bhutanese appear to have repudiated Ngedup and his party for fear that if he became Prime Minister, it would further concentrate political and economic power in and around one family. In this context several interlocutors noted that one of the most popular decisions of the Fifth King in his short reign to date was his 2007 decree to terminate his grandfather's monopoly on sand and stone mining and trading. The decision resulted in a 20 percent drop in the cost of construction material and accounted, in part, for the construction boom in Thimphu, Paro and other urban areas. Beyond the economic benefits accruing to the average Bhutanese from this decision, it was also seen as a signal that the new king would rein in his father's in-laws.

19. (SBU) Another reason behind the PDP's defeat is that the Bhutanese appear to have voted for continuity and the old ways instead of change and a new direction. Rightly or wrongly, the PDP became seen as the party of change while the DPT was perceived as a party of continuity. In reality there is little ideological difference between the two parties and both have manifestos firmly grounded in the Fourth King's concept of Gross National Happiness and its four pillars of equitable and sustainable socio economic development, environmental conservation, preservation of culture and good governance. However, the DPT with many more ex-civil servants and ex-Ministers in its ranks and a more restrained campaign style has become increasingly viewed as the party of the status quo while the PDP has been seen as more open to change. The Bhutanese people, although they voted enthusiastically and in high numbers, have been reluctant converts to democracy. Many have questioned the advisability of a change in course when the system has served the country

well for over a hundred years. The Fourth King, however, has been firm in his pursuit of a constitutional monarchy and in pulling the Bhutanese people along with him. In such an environment, it would not be surprising to see the Bhutanese vote for continuity and the DPT.

¶10. (SBU) Thirdly, the personality of the PDP president and the party's campaign style has worked against the party's candidates. Bhutanese culture appears to encourage non-confrontational, reticent, consensus-seeking, modest and self-effacing political personalities. The DPT party president's brasher, more adversarial personality and the party's louder campaign style may have struck many voters as "un-Bhutanese," causing them to turn to the DPT. Unfortunately for the PDP, the personality of the party president overshadowed the candidates, many of whom would have won on their own but lost because the voters appear to have cast their ballot based on their view about the parties and the man at the top of the ticket rather than about the individual candidates.

¶11. (SBU) Finally, it appears that civil servants may have played an important last-minute role in tipping the vote against the PDP. Both parties conceded that civil servants and government employees disproportionately supported the DPT. Many of these civil servants, going home to vote at their ancestral village or hamlet, fanned out across Bhutan in the last few days before the poll. Analysts argue that these civil servants, who command considerable respect in rural Bhutan, helped sway the vote for the DPT in the closing stretch. This view is supported by the fact Thimphu was almost a deserted town on election day because of the exodus

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of people going home to their permanent place of residence to vote. By one account Thimphu's population of nearly 100,000 had shrunk to 14,000 on election day as the balance of the people went home to vote.

Free, Fair, Peaceful, Transparent

¶12. (SBU) International observers unanimously assessed the election process as free, free and transparent. Although in the days leading up to the election there had been a handful of isolated incidents intended but failing to disrupt the process, election day was entirely peaceful without a single incident reported. The USG team was impressed by how smooth the process appeared to be. Procedures and rules were uniform across polling booths. Polling officials, who appeared to be well-trained, were efficient and knowledgeable. Security at each booth was tight but not intrusive. The dissemination of the results up the line was quick and efficient, although one telephonic misunderstanding caused an error of 200 votes which forced the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) to reverse the results of one race a day after the election.

¶13. (U) The EU Election Observation Mission was by far the largest and most rigorous observer team. The EU mission had been on the ground since February 22 and had deployed over 15 observers. The EU mission reported that the election process generally met international standards. The legal framework provided a solid foundation and the election administration carried out its tasks efficiently. The EU mission further noted that the election allowed for genuine competition between the two parties, the election rolls were accurate, and the Election Commission did an impressive job of preparing for the election in a country with many logistical challenges and little experience in conduction elections. The EU team also found some weaknesses: the party platforms were similar, leaving voters to choose between personalities rather than policy differences; the parties complained that the Election Commission was too strict in applying its authority; candidates were prohibited from discussing security and citizenship issues; NGOs and other civil society

organizations were prohibited from engaging in election activities, which limited the information available to the voters; there were only two parties in the fray, which limited the choice available.

The Numbers: Heavy Turnout

¶14. (U) As expected, election turnout was heavy, with 79.4 percent of the 318,365 registered voters going to the polls, a vast improvement on the 53 percent turnout at the December 31 elections for the National Council. They voted at 865 polling booths in 47 constituencies for 94 candidates from two parties - the Druk Phuensum Tshionga (DPT) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Calm, Orderly, Brisk Process

¶15. (U) The USG team visited 7 polling booths on election day in the capital, Thimphu, the second city and ancient capital of Bhutan, Punakha, and several remote rural areas. Polling was heavy, orderly and extremely organized. Without exception, each polling booth had: a presiding officer who exerted overall command of the process; one party representative from each of the parties contesting; three polling officers who processed the voters; a table for international observers; and a contingent of security officers and ECB officials who controlled the polling area by directing traffic in and out of the polling booth and frisking each voter before allowing him/her into the booth.

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¶16. (U) Inside the polling booth, the first polling officer cross-checked the voter's photo ID card voter against the voter registration rolls. The second polling officer then entered the name chronologically into a second register, had the voter sign (or plant a fingerprint) against it and marked the voter's right index finger with indelible ink. The third polling officer then activated the electronic voting machine, located behind a partition as the voter stepped behind the partition to vote. The voting machine identified the candidates by name, photo, and party election symbols - the wind horse for the PDP and the black necked crane for the DPT. After the vote was cast, the presiding officer then handed the voter a "I have Voted" lapel pin, which most voters proudly donned after they had cast their votes. The presiding officer permitted aged or handicapped voters to bring along one family member into the booth to assist them with the process.

¶17. (U) By 9:30 am on the morning of March 24, each polling booth had two long lines outside it, one for women one for men. The voters waited patiently for their turn, socializing with each other. Towards the afternoon the lines had thinned out, with only a few stragglers showing up to vote. The USG team saw a balanced and well representative turnout of voters by age and sex. Women appeared to slightly outnumber men at the polling sites visited by the USG team. There appeared be as many elderly voters as 18-30 year olds in the voting lines.

Swift Announcement of Results

¶18. (U) Elections results began to trickle in at about two hours after polls closed at 5 pm. All results had been announced by 9 pm. Once polls closed at 5 pm, the presiding officer at every polling booth documented the poll data -- number of votes cast for each candidate -- in the presence of the representatives from the two parties and telephoned the results to the district polling officer at district headquarters. The district polling officers tabulated the results from each polling booth in their constituency and then telephoned and faxed the results to the control center

at the Election Commission of Bhutan office in Thimphu. USG observers watched as election officials at the control center recorded the results for each constituency electronically and on hardcopy. Runners then conveyed the results as they dribbled in to the Bhutan Broadcasting Service booth outside the control room, where television anchors announced the results with analysis and commentary. Media milled about the Election Commission premises interviewing government officials, election observers, bystanders and each other.

Festive Yet Solemn Mood

¶19. (U) The atmosphere at the polling stations was cheerful, with people donning their best clothes to stand in line for long periods. At several polling stations outside of Thimphu, voters had brought along children and other family members, who picnicked in the lawns outside the polling stations. While cheerful and celebratory, there was also an underlying note of solemnity in the proceeding as if the voters were aware that they were participating in a historic event. At one polling booth, family members were trying to comfort an elderly woman who was overcome with the emotion at the significance of casting her vote.

Comment: Lesson for Rest for the World

¶20. (SBU) By successfully executing free and fair elections, first to the National Council in December and then the

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National Assembly in March, Bhutan is charting a brave new course for itself. It is doing this despite the reluctance of many Bhutanese to change a system that has lifted it from the lowest per capita income country in South Asia to the highest in a short span of time. It is also going firmly down this road despite security threats by some Maoist/Communist groups. In a region where democracy has a checkered history and democratic institutions have had difficulty taking root, Bhutan offers a shining example to its near and far neighbors on the wisdom of choosing pluralism, tolerance and democratic values over autocracy, intolerance and exclusion. The USG should identify funding that may be used to support the democratic transition in Bhutan through programs designed to build capacity within institutions of democracy.

Comment: Protecting Sovereignty

¶21. (SBU) The Bhutanese people and Bhutan watchers have long puzzled at the Fourth King's insistence on transitioning from a absolute monarchy to a constitutional democracy despite the reservations of many Bhutanese. The Fourth King's former tutor and confidante Michael Rutland agreed with POL MinCouns's suggestion that the King may view Bhutan's conversion to a full democracy as an inoculation against threats to its sovereignty from its two huge neighbors. In the face of an external threat, a democratic Bhutan is much more likely to elicit international support than a Bhutan that is the property of an absolute monarch. Rutland also observed that, historically, constitutional monarchies have proven more durable than absolute monarchies.

Comment: Strong Minority Representation

¶22. (SBU) The new National Assembly will include nine ethnic Nepalese and four women. This representation will over time help empower both of these groups. At least one woman and one, possibly more, ethnic Nepalese are expected to join the 10-member cabinet that will be formed this month. The ethnic Nepali presence in the National Assembly, proportionately larger than their share of the population, is particularly

heartening as it may help heal some of the old wounds that underlie the refugee camps in Nepal and the feeling of alienation among some ethnic Nepali Bhutanese.

Comment: A Fumble?

123. (SBU) Many observers have argued that the lopsided victory of one party does not bode well for democratic institutions taking root in the fledgling democracy. They contend that the absence of a vigorous opposition in the National Assembly will hinder democratic debate and lead to weaker foundations of democracy. It would no doubt have been preferable to have a strong opposition in place to keep the new government on its toes. We note, however, that in addition to the two PDP members in the National Assembly, the Bhutan Parliament also includes a 25-member National Council and the King, both of which should serve to place checks and balances on the government if it shows a propensity to run roughshod due to its overwhelming majority.

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